

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

VINCENT H. STEFAN

How did you get into biological anthropology, and specifically Easter Island biological anthropology? What triggered your interest?

MY INTEREST IN BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY was purely by accident. While an undergraduate at the University of Wyoming and during a degree check in my junior year, an academic advisor noticed that I was missing the necessary credits in social science and I had to rectify this. At the time I was a pre-med student with a major in zoology, and thought that taking a human osteology class would benefit me in preparing for medical school. The class was being taught by Dr. George W. Gill and, considering that the class was an upper level anthropology class and I was not an anthropology major, I needed to get his permission to take the class. Dr. Gill was gracious enough to allow me to take his course, and it was that event that started me down the path to biological anthropology. It wasn't until later that I learned that Gill had also been a zoology major as an undergraduate.

Once I took Gill's class in human osteology, I was hooked and took every possible class he offered, including his forensic anthropology and human variation courses. I considered changing my major to anthropology but I was so close to graduating and had already changed my major a few times. I felt it was more prudent to stay with zoology and take as much anthropology as I could during my last year and a half at Wyoming. Anyone who has ever taken a biological anthropology class from Gill knows that it is virtually impossible not to have seen a presentation or lecture discussing his work on Easter Island. I am just one of likely thousands of students who have seen his slide show on Easter Island over the years and, like them, I was fascinated and intrigued by Easter Island and the skeletal biology of her prehistoric inhabitants. Yet, I am one of only a few of his students who have ultimately pursued research on Easter Island, a pursuit that again was a result of fortuitous events. However, that pursuit was side tracked for seven years by a short career as a Naval Officer.

Once I decided to go to graduate school I knew I wanted to focus on biological anthropology, specifically

human skeletal biology/forensic anthropology. Ultimately I ended up at the University of New Mexico to study human osteology/forensic anthropology with Dr. J. Stanley Rhine. I still had an interest in Easter Island, but originally it was my intention to conduct a more forensically related dissertation. This plan, however, was quickly and soundly dashed by another faculty member in the department and I was left hanging, not knowing what to do. It was then I called my friend and past professor Dr. Gill, at the insistent urging of my wife, to discuss my situation. The resulting conversation started me down the path of Easter Island biological anthropology research, a path I have never regretted. As we talked, Gill mentioned that, during his years



of excavation, collection and curation of skeletal remains of prehistoric/proto-historic Easter Islanders, he and his colleagues/students had been collecting cranial and postcranial metric and non-metric data, data that had never been fully analyzed. After talking with Dr. Douglas W. Owsley, Gill offered me the cranial metric data that had been collected thus far and suggested I use that data as the basis of a data set that I could utilize for my dissertation. An offer I heartedly accepted! The data set initially had recorded metric data from approximately 167 prehistoric/proto-historic Easter Islanders, as well as data from some Marquesas Islanders. After my own repeated research/data collection trips to museums in the United States, Chile, France, England, Germany and Austria over

the convening years, that data set has expanded to include the cranial metric data of 91 Chatham Island Moriori, 421 Easter Islanders, 14 Gambier Islanders, 133 Hawaiian Islanders, 224 Marquesas Islanders, 224 New Zealand Maori, 19 Southern Cook, 111 Society Islanders, and 44 Tuamotu Archipelago Islanders... a data set from which I conducted my dissertation research and continue to investigate the origins and evolution of the prehistoric Easter Islanders and East Polynesians to this day.

What other areas of interest/research in biological anthropology are you engaged in?

In addition to my skeletal biology research of the prehistoric Easter Islanders and Polynesians, I am also active in forensic anthropology, both as a consultant and in the research/development of new methodologies and techniques. While a graduate student at the University of New Mexico, I served as a forensic anthropology investigator for the Office of the Medical Investigator, Albuquerque, NM, and

had the opportunity to serve as a forensic anthropologist for the United Nations, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in Visoko, Bosnia-Herzegovina, examining remains from mass graves resulting from the execution of individuals from the city of Srebrenica. During my time in New York State I have served with the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT), Region II, which responded to the World Trade Center, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina incidents, and I serve as a consultant to the Dutchess, Nassau, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester County medical examiner's offices. While serving these counties I have contributed to the identification of several individuals and have testified in court as an expert witness regarding trauma sustained by homicide victims. Each set of remains that I examine is a new puzzle to decipher, and I gain great satisfaction in the practical application of my knowledge of the human skeleton.

Who or what do you consider as your most significant influence (scientific or otherwise) either as a person or a particular work (or series of works)?

Unquestionably, the most significant influence on my scientific research is Dr. George W. Gill. Without his encouragement, direction and willingness to share an opportunity, I don't know how or where my professional career would have ended up.

What theory or project of yours turned out to be different from what you had expected as, for example, a complete surprise?

During my dissertation research and background literature review, it was quite evident that the prevailing theory on the origins of the Easter Islanders was that they originated from the Marquesas Islands, either directly or indirectly. So based upon this, I was expecting to see a close similarity between the cranial metrics of the Easter Islanders and the Marquesas Islanders. However, after the statistical analyses were complete, I received a dramatic surprise. When each cranial measurement was compared individually between each pair of my East Polynesian samples, I found that the Easter Islanders and the Marquesas Islanders had the most statistically significant differences. This was something I was not expecting and went against the current archaeological and anthropological thought at the time. If the Marquesas Islands were the point of origin for the Easter Islanders, why were the crania of the inhabitants so dramatically different?

What was your best Eureka moment?

The same analysis discussed above showed that the Easter Islanders were the most similar to and had the fewest statistically significant differences with crania from the Gambier Islands. This to me was a dramatic result. It pointed to a different point of origin for the Easter Islanders, a point of origin which made sense given the geographic location of the islands. Unknown to me at the time was the fact that Dr.

Roger C. Green, a Polynesian-Pacific archaeologist, was conducting a reevaluation/reexamination of Easter Island artifacts and concluded that they had the closest similarity in form and tool kit composition to those from the Gambier Islands. These were independent lines of evidence pointing to a new source for the Easter Islanders. Further support for this hypothesis came when I conducted statistical analyses of data from some Henderson Island crania, with the results showing a close similarity to Easter Islander crania. The results of these analyses show the probable pathway of colonization of Easter Island starting from the Gambier Islands passing through Henderson Island.

What do you hope to accomplish (in biological anthropology) on Easter Island in the future?

I hope to continue to refine the search for the origins of the Easter Islanders and to document the migration and micro-evolution of all East Polynesians as I expand my dataset and apply more sophisticated analytical techniques and methods as they become available.

What is your favorite Easter Island site, and why?

Vinapu. The stone masonry present on the *ahu's* seawall is spectacular and it amazes me how the prehistoric Easter Islanders were able to cut, shape and fit the stones with such precision.

What myth or misinformation about Easter Island would you like to dispel?

At some point I would like to be able to prove conclusively the presence or absence of South American Indians on Easter Island during the prehistoric period. There are still theories and folklore of a South American Indian presence on the island prior to or during the Polynesian occupation of the island, and I would like to find the skeletal proof of such a presence if it exists. Skeletal evidence may exist in some dusty museum collection drawer or in some secluded lava tube cave on Easter Island that hasn't been explored. Finding an irrefutable South American Indian crania on Easter Island would certainly shake up the scientific community conducting research on Easter Island.

What is the most important thing you'd like visitors (or scientists, for that matter) to know about Easter Island?

To me, the most important thing visitors need to know about Easter Island is the archaeological sites and the human skeletal remains that can still be found on the island are fragile and need to be protected. Time and the elements are slowly erasing and destroying the sites, artifacts and human skeletal remains, and with their destruction come the loss of scientific information. It is imperative that visitors know and acknowledge this fact and do everything they can to minimize their impact and not accelerate or exacerbate the natural destructive process that is already occurring.

What advice would you give to a person interested in Easter Island archaeology or anthropology, (or those fields generally?)

Easter Island has been the most intensely studied Polynesian island with regards to archaeology and anthropology. Given that, however, if you are interested in pursuing research in Easter Island try to attack a research question from a different angle or approach, try different techniques and/or methodologies, or select uninvestigated sites or undescribed skeletal elements. There is still a great deal more that can be done to further contribute to our understanding of the prehistoric Easter Island people and culture.

What would you have done if you had not pursued your current line(s) of research and interests?

If I hadn't been exposed to biological anthropology, forensic anthropology, and Easter Island skeletal biology, it is quite likely I would have remained in the Navy and continued my career as a Surface Line Officer.

Date and place of birth?

November 24, 1961. Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
BA, Zoology, University of Wyoming, 1984
MS, Anthropology, University of New Mexico, 1995
Ph.D., Anthropology, University of New Mexico, 2000

REVIEWS

DIFFUSIONISM RECONSIDERED: ROUND 2

POLYNESIAN SEAFARING AND AMERICAN HORIZONS: A RESPONSE TO JONES AND KLAR

by Atholl Anderson; *American Antiquity*, October 2006, Volume 71, No. 4 pp. 759-763

ON OPEN MINDS AND MISSED MARKS: A RESPONSE TO ATHOLL ANDERSON

Terry L. Jones and Kathryn A. Klar; *American Antiquity*, October 2006, Volume 71, No. 4 pp. 765-770

Review and Discussion by Scott Nicolay

HAVING EARLIER PROVIDED A REVIEW in this journal of "Diffusionism Reconsidered," the paper by archaeologist Terry Jones and linguist Kathryn Klar in which they presented their argument for prehistoric Polynesian-Chumash contacts, I feel some responsibility to keep our readership up to date on this important line of research as it continues to unfold. The October 2006 issue of *American Antiquity*, the same journal that published the original paper in July 2005, contains the latest round in the debate over whether Polynesians may have made landfall in Southern California

and brought with them the technology of the sewn-plank canoe, with a response to the original paper by Atholl Anderson, and a counter-response to Anderson from Jones and Klar. That this topic would generate at least some discussion should not be a surprise to anyone, but that the first major critique would come from one of the foremost experts on Polynesian seafaring rather than an archaeologist working in North America is a bit unexpected. It even seems to have taken Jones and Klar themselves a bit off-guard.

Atholl Anderson was originally scheduled as one of the discussants at the 2005 Society for American Archaeology symposium in Salt Lake City where Jones and Klar rolled out their full argument and sought input from a wide range of scholars as they prepared their case for publication. He was unable to attend, however, and this is unfortunate, as he would presumably have presented some of his objections at that time, and Jones and Klar could have attempted to address them in the original paper.

Anderson's critique ultimately has more to do with the debates over settlement dates and voyaging capabilities that have so far characterized Polynesian archaeology at the beginning of the 21st century than with the case for trans-Pacific diffusion. In his response, he writes: "Jones and Klar have not understood the extent of my departure from the current consensus about Polynesian seafaring." Anderson is one of the leading figures currently building a case for settlement dates in East Polynesia much later than those that were generally accepted during most of the latter half of the last century. Some RNJ readers will also be familiar with the recent paper by Terry Hunt and Carl Lipo in the journal *Science* that drew similar conclusions based largely on their work on Rapa Nui. Anderson's own words acknowledge his awareness that his views on this topic remain as controversial as Jones and Klar's own argument, if not even more so.

This debate over settlement dates may very likely redefine the paradigm of Polynesian prehistory; however, it is a discussion that has only just begun, and many questions remain to be answered. Jones and Klar are fully justified in basing their own arguments on what remains the accepted view at this point rather than a controversial thesis that had just begun to appear when they were preparing their own case for publication. Even if Anderson is correct in his argument that the settlement of East Polynesia could not have occurred before AD 800-900, those dates still overlap with Jones and Klar's proposed AD 400-800 contact window.

Anderson also questions the possibility of Polynesian-Chumash contact on the basis of his perceptions of prehistoric Polynesian voyaging capabilities. He has been critical of the "reconstructed" Polynesian voyaging canoes such as Hōkule'a employed by Ben Finney and Nainoa Thompson, most notably in his paper "Towards the Sharp End: The Form and Performance of Prehistoric Polynesian Voyaging Canoes," which appeared in *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific*, published by the Easter Island Foundation. The title of that pa-